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Center or Margin? The Place of Media Play in Children's Leisure: Case Studies from Sweden and Australia

Karen Orr Vered

While nobody would question the appropriateness of crayons, paints, books, and music in a children's recreation center, the provision of electronic media and children's access to digital playthings in after-school care settings is not a simple matter. Having undertaken a trip to Sweden to see how children were being supported to use media in play and recreation, I found that media had fallen from favor and adults were having difficulty maintaining access and replacing equipment, while children made the most of what remained. Drawing for comparison on earlier research in Australia, this chapter tries to make sense of the unexpected circumstances by looking at the larger discursive context in which children's recreation and leisure are defined and legitimated. Marketing narratives for consumer electronics, concerns about child health, and notions of appropriate modes for media consumption all influence children's access to media in after-school care settings.

Comparative Research: Making Sense of the Unexpected

In 2001 I began reporting research findings from an Australian study of children's media use in after-school care (Vered, 2001, 2006, 2008). At international conferences, my exchanges with Scandinavian colleagues left me with the impression that Scandinavian children had generous access to media in a variety of public contexts outside of homes and classrooms.[1] Meetings with Swedish colleagues in 2005 en-

couraged my view that Swedish after-school care services, in particular, were places where children were allowed to play freely with media and, more importantly, were encouraged to create media. My interest in a comparison between children's media play cultures in Australian after-school care services and the Swedish equivalent, *fritids* and *öppen fritidsverksamhet* (after-school leisure-time centers), was supported by other factors as well.

Sweden and Australia share a play-centric philosophy with respect to recreational childcare for children ages five to twelve. There was little indication in the literature that Sweden had adopted the view that has been growing in strength across the United States and United Kingdom to place the burden of educational remediation and enrichment on after-school care services.[2] Australian Out of School Hours Care services (including before- and after-school care and vacation care for school holidays) were initiated and endure to assist parents to remain in the workforce by providing children with safe and enjoyable leisure-time activities after school. In Sweden, *fritids* are similarly described with the dual functions of enabling parents to "combine parenthood and work" and ensuring that children have "high quality pedagogical activity to contribute to providing children with favorable conditions for growing up" (*Skolverket* 2007).[3] The priority for play culture in *fritids* was persistent in 2007 when I visited, while play had clearly come under threat and scrutiny elsewhere, especially in the United States as a result of the "No Child Left Behind" policy.[4] Scandinavian households are media rich by international standards, and consequently I expected to find a relatively positive attitude toward media integration and media use in general. I was eager to see what children were doing with media in these intermediary spaces and had hoped to find models for development or trial in Australia. In 2007 I undertook research in Sweden, where I visited *fritids* and *öppen fritidsverksamhet* to explore children's media cultures.[5]

To my surprise, the media play and use cultures in *fritids* and *öppen fritidsverksamhet* were more limited and circumscribed than I had anticipated, and there was little evidence that creative recreational media use was being encouraged. The place of media in *fritids* was marginal in terms of space and in relation to other play and creative activity. Children's access to media technologies, where available, was also limited to one session per week. The location of media technology was often peripheral to the other activities on offer. Rather than *fritids* services supporting and encouraging rich media play cultures, I found that the collaborative, creative and playful media cultures generated by children's activities were not being extended or supported by the structural contexts and management practices within care services.

My observations were further confirmed by staff when they said that they were having difficulty negotiating with superiors to fund equipment purchases,

even where they seemed to have well-developed plans for creative media projects. There were remnants from previous times when media play seems to have been more central to the play culture, but accounts by staff of these earlier, media-rich times were delivered with unease and lack of assuredness. Staff readily attributed the limitations on media access and play to parental request for less media play and more outdoor play. Despite a lack of support from external structures and adult agendas and actions designed to diminish media play, children's endemic media play cultures were surviving in the cracks and crannies.

How to make sense of the circumstances I encountered was challenging and not immediately obvious. While overt policy statements about the value of play and providing a broad range of recreational activities are meant to guide the design and provision of after-school care services and programs, pressure to shape services also comes from other, less-enduring discourses. Decisions about media provision, access, and activities in children's recreational settings are informed by discourses that intersect with notions of childhood, childcare, and supervision but which demonstrate little understanding of children's media practices and cultures. Children's media use is often demonized and pathologized as media are singled out and blamed for a range of unwanted social situations and circumstances. A common response in such climates is to discourage media use by children and youth in the realms that have specific responsibility for children: schools and leisure centers.

In the present social climate, the specter of rising rates of childhood obesity is readily brought into service in the ongoing battle to de-legitimate media play among children's leisure-time activities. The discourse of health and wellbeing marks media in two ways: media play is falsely characterized as sedentary, and media narratives are said to orient children toward unhealthy consumerism. Here there is no distinction between a *media text* and a *play activity that involves media.* They are seen as equally bad. The richness of interpretation and appreciation that children bring to a media text through play is not accounted for. The public and social dimensions of media use are likewise ignored.

What children actually do with media is less familiar to us than what marketing tells us we should do with media. Marketing campaigns and advertisements for hardware and software instruct us on how to use media and show us what it looks like to play a video game or surf the web (O'Grady 2010). Children's actual media practices and use patterns, however, are less familiar than the popular fictions of marketing that influence attitudes and policy on children's access to media and, in particular, the degree of autonomy children are granted for various activities. Discourses of leisure and work, which align with the places of home and school, also influence the development of policy for children's recreation and care. In an effort to understand the circumstances I encountered, this chapter considers how com-

peting discourses shape the provision and use of media in children's after-school care services and programs.

Why Media Play Matters

In *Teaching Youth Media* (2003), Steve Goodman clearly observes that

> the failure of schools and after-school programs to address the media as the predominant language of youth today, or to recognize the social and cultural contexts in which students live, has resulted in a profound disconnect. It's a disconnect that occurs between the experiences that most students have during their time in school and those they have during their time outside of school. (p. 2)

Goodman emphatically argues that educators and others who care about and for children and youth must "develop a deeper and nuanced understanding of the forces that shape their lives—our media and consumer culture" so that schools and after-school programs might help young people develop the abilities to "analyze, evaluate, and produce print, aural, and visual forms of communication;" in short, to develop "critical literacy" (p. 3).

More important for the younger cohort of five to twelve year olds involved in after-school care, the UNESCO's *Youth Media Survey 2001* reports that "there is very little evidence internationally of systematic or extensive media education provision for younger children (under the age of 11)" (Domaille and Buckingham 2001, 9). I would add that there is even less evidence of media production activity for this age group. More recently, according to the Australian Communication and Media Authority (2009), most children report learning about online safety and etiquette at school, well after they have become experienced online agents through use at home.[6] So, online experience and online safety "instruction" are asynchronous. Children become familiar and competent with media through recreational use outside of formal instruction or supervision by adults. They learn independently and with one another through recreational, participant, and consumer activities that are available in a media-rich culture. When recreational and entertainment media are excluded from after-school care services and programs, their absence seems unnatural, their omission planned. It is precisely because these media are the playthings of our time that they ought to be part of the everyday environment of recreational care. If after-school care services are meant to provide relevant play and leisure experiences for children, surely media play is legitimate play.

There is a growing concern among educationalists that classrooms are becoming evermore distinct from the rest of life, because classrooms are media-free zones where mobile phones are prohibited, Internet sites are blocked and games are unheard of. While some children's home lives may be media rich, the digital divide

has not been bridged. Many children do not have rich electronic home lives. Nor is there generic integration of media across the curriculum in primary schooling. After-school care services, without ties to curricular agendas, can provide recreational and entertainment media and are uniquely situated between home and classroom. They often have most of the media from both domains. Under these circumstances, children's media use is qualitatively different from the ways in which the same media are used in family homes and classrooms (Vered 2008). As intermediary spaces, after-school care services can help mend "the disconnect" that Goodman (2003) identifies in children's everyday experiences. More importantly, the contribution that after-school care can make to a child's growing media competency may be less aligned with critical literacy but more oriented toward developing creativity and expressivity.

Quality Media Play in After-school Care Settings

In Australia, after-school care (and its morning equivalent) provides an intermediary space between home and classroom, especially when services are situated on school grounds, as is the most common case. Although after-school care shares features of both home and school, it is neither. It is a third space in children's lives and one that mediates between the other two. The unique character of after-school care is reflected in the ways that children use media in this third space. Even though services have the same media as most households and classrooms, the ways in which children use media are different from both home and classroom use.

Children's media use in after-school care is:

- Restricted and limited due to resource pressures
- Social & collaborative due to the public and social environment
- Leisurely and playful because children direct their own activity
- Creative because children self-select activities and pursue them at a leisurely pace
- Public by design
- Peer-regulated by default as a result of scarce resources and high demand

Thus, children's media use in after-school care is related to but different from home and classroom use. The combination of these features makes children's media play in these public, recreational environments often of higher quality than their media play can be at home and more creative than their media use may be in classrooms. At home, children most often play video games alone. At after-school

care, the limitations of scarce resources push children to pursue activities and play in pairs and groups. They play video games in pairs with galleries of observers cheering, gasping, and chattering commentary and advice. The play space is effectively expanded beyond the screen as a social activity extended geographically. Children sometimes collaborate over video games in a serial fashion and thereby extend the play experience in time (Vered 2008, 82–85). Both playing in groups and playing with several players in a serial fashion are ways of playing that children have developed to accommodate the given constraints. Place, space and play cultures contour the activities and routines of media play in Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) (Vered 2006) and often reject the scripted play of marketing narratives.

Media play in after-school care engages children with one another in activities that are often pursued, much to the dissatisfaction of adults, independently at home. The popularity of media play in these group settings generates time limits on individual turns, in contrast to what occurs in family homes where children face less competition for resources and are less closely monitored. At home, children have longer periods of independent "time on machine." In Australian after-school care services, where children were given control over the playback of videos and DVDs, children often used the DVD player like a karaoke machine to play and replay favorite songs and sing along, performing dance routines and watching actively rather than "passively" (Vered 2008, 118). Television was the least popular medium, and use of the computer lab was a popular favorite across age groups and genders. The features of children's media play that most bother adults—individual use for great lengths of time—are simply not possible in after-school care, and the use patterns that are possible (collaborative, social, public) seem to turn on its head the set of prejudices that adults have about children's media play cultures.

Among the Australian services studied, only one of the six sustained a long-term media production program. Under the banner of "Movie Magic," children and staff produced a feature movie in about a year's time (see Vered 2008, chapter 8). The children generated the story idea and helped staff produce the script. Children mainly participated as actors in the movies, but some technical positions in camera and sound were undertaken by children. Children's responsibility for production roles increased each year as experienced technicians returned. The program approached moviemaking from a fan's perspective and capitalized on the children's consumer practices, knowledge and experience. The marketing-consumer nexus was used as an entry point to production, and the program aimed to produce a mini-Hollywood movie, replete with an opening-night gala event that drew hundreds to the Town Hall. Such sustained, organized, group production activity, however, was an exception among the after-school care services in Australia, but one that offers an instructive example.

Children's Media Play in *Fritids*

My trip to Sweden was conducted in September when children were still enjoying outdoor play before the winter weather set in. Visiting three cities—Malmö, Stockholm, and Halmstad—I attended four *fritids* and one *fritidsverksamhet* (service for youth) where I observed the children and spoke with them and the staff in most cases.[7] Given the similarities between the Australian and Swedish services, I was surprised by the limited institutional support for media use but pleased to see children making the most of media at the margins of play culture.

In Malmö the after-school care services were divided into three groups: two for children aged six to nine and a third for older children. Of the two groups for younger children, one had a single computer in the main indoor room, which was equipped with Audacity, Freemind, Movie Maker, Photfiltre, and Photostory software. I learned that children had previously worked with staff on producing photo essays and movies, but these activities were no longer pursued. The other group did not have an equivalent set-up but was expecting to acquire one soon. Media provision for this group amounted to one desktop computer with Internet access, housed in a small storage room. A variety of approved sites were bookmarked, including YouTube and a range of free gaming sites. Children were allowed fifteen-minute turns with a partner but not alone. The door was closed, but staff could see in through a glass pane. There were no "rules" posted or other instructions; the children were granted considerable autonomy during their turn, albeit with a partner.

I first sat with a pair of eight-year-old boys as they undertook a YouTube session, surfing for clips and genres. They sought Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee, excerpts from *The Simpsons*, music videos by rapper 50 Cent. "Extreme sports" was a search term, and "babies" was another, which provided a genre of comedic shorts that they enjoyed. The appeal of the baby videos reminded me of the *Baby Burlesque* short films from the early 1930s in which Shirley Temple starred. The comedy is based on the ironic inversion of babies performing adult actions. A Wilkinson shaving blade advertisement was a particular favorite with the boys.[8] The short animated narrative involves the stereotype of a jealous husband whose wife has a baby and subsequently neglects the man as she turns her affection to the infant. The man realizes that the baby's soft skin is the attraction for his wife, and he decides that he can win back her affection with the right shaving blade (a Wilkinson blade). The baby notices that the mother's attention has turned to the father, and he takes revenge on the father ninja-style, flying and kicking and karate chopping the adult into submission. The animation style is reminiscent of *Ally McBeal*'s (1997–2002) dancing baby, which became an Internet meme. The video combines two genres that the boys enjoyed: kung-fu and babies. Alternating turns

choosing the clip to view, the Wilkinson baby came up in their game of YouTube call and response after a kung-fu clip. Another favorite was "Hahaha," a home video of a giggling baby, which made them laugh hysterically.[9]

Multitasking, as they surfed for YouTube clips they also played back tunes from their mobile phones. About five minutes into their session the conversation about mobile phones gained momentum; they decided to download tunes from the Web to their phones. They attempted to transfer music via Bluetooth from the computer to a phone but were not successful. They spent another five minutes trying to negotiate the connection between computer and phone. They told me they knew how to do this at home and were disappointed that they could not achieve their goal.

Aiming to exploit as much technological potential as possible, the boys were attempting a task beyond the capabilities of the system. It seems the necessary Bluetooth dongle was missing, but the boys did not suspect that hardware might be the missing link. After five minutes on this activity, they returned to surfing, and they laughed, pointed and commented on the clips they were sharing with each other and with me. Although they wanted to do more, their play ultimately became a clip screening mash-up session. When their fifteen minutes were up, they happily moved on and two girls entered the computer cubby.

The girls came in on cue and engaged in roughly the same activities. They played a few online games and looked for clips from *The Simpsons*. Although they began, like the boys, with a system of taking turns showing each other a clip, they soon decided to look for clips that they both enjoyed. They shared an interest in *High School Musical 2* and were keen to find what they called the "real" *High School Musical 2* clips. Through a combination of Swedish, English and Spanish, I asked how they could tell a "real" clip from the rest. The girls (eight years old) supplied three criteria for authenticity: displaying the Disney logo or watermark, presence of the recognizable actors, and high-resolution video. These criteria demonstrate the girls' sophisticated knowledge of industrial business practices (watermarks), aesthetic hierarchy (high resolution), and YouTube's potpourri of "quality."[10] Their fluency with issues of genre was revealed when I asked them what they liked about the movie. They talked about the love story or romance, and they punctuated their remarks with a performance of mock kissing followed by giggles. Once they found the "real" clips they sang along. The re-mix and replay are similar to the video playback practices of Australian children who were given similar autonomy in video playback control.

The intimate setting of the computer's situation in a small alcove room meant that no more than two children at a time could use the computer. The karaoke utility that the girls discovered in YouTube clips could have provided an activity for several children, and a physically active one at that, had the computer been in a

more open and public arena. The paired-use rule resulted in same-sex/gender pairs, which also has consequences for the type of activity pursued. The girls' rejection of the alternation system and preference for a shared interest search strategy rings bells about gendered behavior, but that line of inquiry was not pursued due to time limitations.

Staff here said they had plans to acquire a new computer and equip it with Photoshop and other software to facilitate multi-step photo projects starting with digital still photography and moving through effects and editing to create photo essays, exhibitions, Web sites and other publications. The children frequently went on a short excursion to a nearby park to play on the climbing equipment, and the staff member thought that taking photographs in an off-site location would be appealing to the children and provide a starting point for a larger digital photo project. Here the staff had a clearly articulated ambition for media production, and given the appeal of music videos and karaoke to the children, they would have been keen to participate in production that would bring together music and image.

This school also ran a center for older children up to eighteen years of age, *fritidsverksamhet*, which operated in a facility that was also a youth centre in the later hours of the day and on weekends. Unlike the facility that the younger children used, this space had little trace of being a school. Among the pool table, foosball table, and canteen area was a widescreen TV mounted high on a wall, and several sofas formed a square from which the screen could be seen. Coffee tables had lit candles, and overall the ambiance was "lounge." At the edge of the lounge space, in a corridor adjoining this with the kitchen, was a PlayStation console opposite two groovy '70s-era automobile bucket seats. This gaming area was set up for competition between two players, given that the seating allowed for little else. Having seen that the girls were interested in video games, the service director purchased a few games with what he called "girls' taste" in mind. These were music quiz and karaoke games. Two girls would play while others watched and waited to play the winner in round-robin fashion.

Further to the periphery of the central action, atop a bench overlooking the kitchen, were two Internet-ready computers, but they did not have any production software loaded. The machines were there for accessing online games, tracking sport teams and scores, and other information retrieval. They were not equipped for any production activities. The computer provision stood in stark contrast to the elaborate arts and crafts production area, which was a dedicated and well-provisioned room. For both age groups the provision of hardware and software is better described as a gesture than a commitment. Sustained digital media production was not possible with such little investment. One could argue that

only the consumer side of the media equation was supported, with most access designed to position the user as an audience member due to lack of equipment.

There is, however, another way to view the consumer's participation in the clip culture that characterizes YouTube. The children's strategy of selecting clips and thereby creating flow is a mash-up technique prominent, if not dominant among practices that mark new media systems as having less distinction between production and consumption modes, and producer and consumer roles (Ulricchio 2009). The bricolage process required by YouTube signals emergent media production practices that are codified but not yet institutionalized. Even at the margins of media and in the crevices of children's leisure spaces, we can identify creativity in children's media practices.

At one site in Stockholm I was able to observe the children on the day they had access to the school's computer lab. At this school, children did not have access to computers in their classroom activities until sixth grade, when they began to use computers for research, writing, and some art making. During *fritids* on a Thursday, the children in the computer lab were in second and third grades and keen on computers. The day I observed, twenty-five children were in the lab, most participating in the virtual world, Club Penguin (www.clubpenguin.com).

Founded in 2005 as an ad-free virtual world for children to play games and interact, Club Penguin's success gained the attention of Disney and became part of the Disney family in 2007 (http://www.clubpenguin.com/company/about.htm). Today Club Penguin is an award-winning, virtual community inhabited by penguin characters and their pet "puffles." The site has an Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating of E (Everyone, U.S.), and there is a moderator present during game play.[11] A player name and password allows one to play, but paid membership ($US 5.95/month) provides access to additional "members only" activities and privileges. The day I observed, only one child was a member, and the rest enjoyed the free access and activities.

The site offers a blog, comic strips, opportunity to upload fan art and photos of your Club Penguin soft toys, images to download and color in, wallpapers, screen savers, and the Penguin Poll (a survey tool), among other features. Game play, perhaps the most appealing aspect of the site, takes place on the iceberg where penguins congregate. Across a range of locations (sporting stadium, shopping, entertainment district, beach, dock, ski village, cove, mine, forest, and member igloos) a variety of activities and mini-games can be pursued. As penguin icons move around the terrain, other penguins might communicate in text bubbles, asking others to participate in a sled race or start a snowball fight.

In the lab, computers were arranged in the standard rows, and children sat side by side, each facing their own screen but all playing in Club Penguin. Eager to play with each other, they used the proximity of oral communication to overcome

the dispersed virtual presence. They yelled across the room to one another, "Where are you? Which world are you in?" With this question the child may be asking where in the game world the other player is, and once identified, their penguins can "play together" in a snowball fight or sled race. The question might, however, be asking which game server the friend is on. If the children are logged on to different servers, their penguins will not appear in the same game space. This can be remedied by logging off and on again to the nominated server. The point is that children strive to co-locate themselves in the virtual world while playing with each other in the computer lab. Since the computer lab is set up in rows, they cannot readily see the screen of their friend to monitor which server they log on to and where the penguins go. In their rush to log on, they did not bother to set a rendezvous server. To simultaneously play in the physical and virtual worlds requires supplemental communication and exchange. One child walked across the room to a friend and said, "I've sent you a message."

A favorite activity was virtual vandalism—rearranging the furniture in someone else's igloo. They played games, "bought" stuff for their penguins, read the penguin press, visited one another, and sent messages.[12] The English-language elements of the game aligned well with the bilingual school's curriculum, but more generally the virtual world offers familiarity with standard format, function, and operations associated with complex graphical interfaces common to many sites. The virtual world of Club Penguin defies the physical boundaries that distinguish home, classroom and *fritids* because it can be played anywhere, but children still engage the co-presence of their friends in physical proximity.

Another site I visited in Stockholm was a parent-managed school, what they call a "private" school, where 43 percent of the children attended *fritids*. Staff and the school principal had very positive attitudes toward media production but were battling parental disfavor; parents said they preferred *fritids* to provide more physical play and less media use. The school had recently retained a new principal and computer lab supervisor. The location of *fritids* had changed, and they no longer had daily access to computers. While staff reported that there had been a vibrant media production culture in the past, recent changes had resulted in a hiatus. When previously *fritids* had daily access to the computer lab, each day a different age-graded group would have two hours' access. Staff proudly told me how they had (in the past) maintained a digital portfolio of each child's creative works (paintings, drawings, origami, and so forth) so that upon graduation each child received a CD compilation to remember his/her *fritids* experiences. Also in the past, staff published a magazine about *fritids* and children made movies and CDs, although staff did the editing. They described a rich and varied media production culture with considerable support for children's digital media creativity. I was as-

tonished to see that very little remained. How easy is it to cease delivery of a popular activity, and how much pressure must be applied to make that decision?

Among the staff, a young male musician was keen to see the children make a film from script to final cut. In our conversations over three visits I tried to support his intentions because, given the circumstances and parental disposition, they were under threat. Perhaps because there was little media play at the time I observed, we had long and reflective conversations about children and media. Seeing that girls rarely played the video games, they had established "girls-only" days to encourage girls to play games, but they still limited game access because they feared it would be too popular. Staff did not think that a large group of children watching a couple of kids play a game was a good idea.

A strikingly similar view was expressed in the Australian study, where the service with the most well-developed media production program (Movie Magic) provided the least support for digital games and computer use. And, like the service in Australia, this one showed movies on Fridays, and the screenings would gather thirty to forty children to reverently watch a DVD. Such a screening practice, where movies are shown on select days and children sit in audience formation, replicates dominant patterns of film exhibition and marketing—the way one would behave in a theatre setting.

Here it was fairly easy to see how dominant marketing narratives and standardized media consumption patterns influenced the rules that adults set for children's media use. The large audience assembled to co-view a movie in reverent repose replicates the exhibition and consumption practices of theatrical release and was acceptable to adult sensibilities. On the other hand, a large group of children co-playing a video game is not the image that has been marketed for video game play, and this was discouraged. While adults support group viewing of a movie, a similarly large group of children playing with a video game is discouraged. This suggests that adult concepts of what constitutes children's media play are not based in knowledge of children's practices but are instead reflective of other ideologies, like those that marketing campaigns exploit when selling hardware and software for domestic use.[13]

Marketing, Media, and Mythology

It is safe to say that the majority of people who set policy for after-school care services have not been part of the core market for games and are not avid readers of gaming magazines. On the other hand, they would be familiar with mainstream advertising for games and hardware and with the popular and public discourse on gaming that circulates via news reports and representations of gaming in film and TV. The masculine bias of mainstream marketing of Xbox displays a culture of competition rather than collaboration, action rather than contemplation. The

absence of players in these ads does not support a view of the positive features of children's collaborative video game play that I have identified in children's recreational media cultures. After-school care providers do not see a likeness of themselves or their charges in advertising's rare representation of players. Digital games are not positively associated with school or after-school care. Despite the high quality of children's digital game-playing activity when it is undertaken in public, mixed-gender, mixed-age cohorts, this play culture is not well known and almost constitutes "secret children's knowledge."

Mainstream media advertisements for Microsoft (Xbox) and Sony (PlayStation) hardware tend not to feature players. Their demographic is the solid gaming constituency of males eighteen to thirty years old. A Google search (in September 2009) for "Xbox ads" revealed a series of ads aired in different national markets. Each ad featured a leisure activity like skateboarding, jumping rope, a multi-participant water balloon fight, or similar activities. Game consoles, game play, and players were either entirely absent or only appeared in the last shot as punctuation to a narrative about active fun. These ads relied upon images and feelings associated with physical activity, outdoor fun, and youthfulness to sell hardware for indoor recreation. They were aligned with a soft version of extreme sports. This recalls an earlier generation of Xbox marketing that featured competitive sports because sports games were central to the console's broad appeal upon release.[14]

With respect to the sale of game software, as graphic representation becomes more filmic, advertisements that feature in-game play are able to exploit an aesthetic continuity across film, game, and TV. Irrespective of whether the ad appears on broadcast TV, cable, satellite, or online, the medium is consumed as video, and in-game play now looks like movies and TV. In hardware and software advertisements, players are featured marginally, if at all. Instead of real players we have the idea of players, and that idea is a masculine one.

When gaming platforms moved from the arcade to the household, single-player games became increasingly common. We are now several generations down the line from the earliest consoles, but the image of the single player still holds an iconic status, despite the development of new technologies that afford a vast array of group play/use configurations. Unlike Sony and Microsoft, Nintendo has been keen to expand its market beyond the core male, eighteen- to thirty-year-old demographic. They make the most games for children, and the multiplayer input capabilities of the Nintendo64 platform were heavily promoted with its 1996 release. Nintendo's newer platforms, such as the personal-sized Dual Screen (DS) and the multi-function input Wii, are being actively marketed to female consumers. A Google search for "Nintendo DS ads" (in September 2009) yielded the following selection:

- Nicole Kidman & her Nintendo DS Lite advert
- Olivia Newton-John's Nintendo DS ad
- Rhythm Heaven Nintendo DSi commercial featuring Beyoncé
- Girls Aloud Nintendo DS advert

These ads feature popular celebrity women, some of them moving toward the "mature" end of the hot-chic continuum. In the Girls Aloud ad, the five women are playing together on their individual DS devices, grouped closely to one another on a plush sofa. In another advert Olivia Newton-John shares her DS with a young female assistant as they sit closely together riding in a limousine. Even such personal technology is featured as a social gaming platform or prompt for social interaction. The message in these campaigns is that the screen is more fun when shared with friends.

Most of the Wii commercials foreground localized group play and promote a party-like play culture where "friends come around and join in the fun." The wholesome fun of human co-presence has displaced the distributed-virtual-social nature of online communities and the imagined isolated player. One Wii Sport commercial features Australian pop singer Delta Goodrem and her current fiancé, former boy-band singer Brian McFadden, playing a game of Wii tennis. (There is a pun included here for Goodrem fans because she was previously romantically involved with pro-tennis player Mark Philippoussis.) Players are central to Nintendo's marketing campaigns, even for the "personal technologies" of Game Boy and DS. Although these devices are miniature and mobile, they feature multiplayer capabilities, with the newest models being "wi-fi ready" and earlier models connecting with one another through a link cable. Both systems allow for simultaneous multiplayer gaming.

Unlike the PlayStation and Xbox campaigns that sublimate the technology, the product, and the player(s) by substituting a sentiment, Nintendo advertisements feature the people that they want to become players. Nintendo ads seek to provide a reflection of the consumer—see yourself here; buy our product—they seem to say. But the market expansion project that seeks to develop a wider consumer base among women and across generations is relatively new.

The link between marketing campaigns and policy/programming development in after-school care is not a direct one, but the most accessible narratives that describe and characterize games and players leave behind a particular image. This image does not represent the type of practice that readily develops among play groups in after-school care settings when media are made available and children are granted autonomy in their play. The localized social world of play depicted in

the Nintendo Wii advertisements is more akin to what actually transpires in after-school care when children have access to video games and computers.

In both Australia and Sweden the commercial narratives about how to use media (how to play a game) or how to consume media (how to watch a film) appear to be the most accessible for adults. Adults want children to watch a film as a quietly assembled audience (individuals seated in a group), because that's how movies are watched in the theatre. They do not want children to play video games because they believe that these are played by single players, because that's what the marketing has told us until recently. The large group assembly for a movie screening is acceptable, but a large group playing a game is not. A movie must have an audience; watching alone is forbidden. A game should not have a gallery, presumably because game play is understood as a manual, not mental, activity; only those holding the controls are truly playing.

These dominant and culturally sanctioned media use patterns have developed from commercial imperatives. Digital games are distributed according to an economic model of publishing. Single player games sell more units. The economics of theatrical film exhibition, by contrast, rests with the theatre owner who rents the film and in whose interest it is to screen the film to a large audience. On the one hand, the dominant paradigm can help develop media production cultures like Movie Magic or the *fritids'* Electronic Newsletter. On the other hand, failing to allow children to play in ways unscripted by marketing narratives prevents us from discovering the creativity and diversity in children's media play when they are given autonomy. Forcing children to watch movies in theatrical style prohibits them from using the DVD as a karaoke machine or soundtrack for their dance routines.

The concern over rising rates of childhood obesity is also marshaled in the battle against the appropriateness and legitimacy of media in children's play. Although I did not *see* any fat children in Sweden, the idea of fat children was everywhere. The ambition to include more physical activity in the *fritids* agenda has resulted in a view that media play is not and cannot be physical. This view, however, is contrary to what I have documented of Australian children's media play, where children often use media content as background for their physical activities of dancing, performing, and role playing in quite elaborate run-and-chase games (Vered 2008, 77–82). Rather than using media to stimulate physical play, media play has been deemed to be mutually exclusive with physical activity. Practices like sequestering computers in broom closets establish physical limitations that preclude children from choreographing physical play with media use. The clip culture and karaoke practices of the Swedish children might have led to more physical and larger group play around music video had Internet access been available in a more open environment. One can easily imagine a group of children forming their own

band to perform for the production of a video clip that eventually becomes part of the YouTube archive. Perhaps the evolutionary developments of the Wii will be accompanied by a revolutionary change in attitudes toward children's media play as marketing makes clear the physical dimensions of media play with the new device.

A clear view of children's media play cultures is not possible through the prism of discourse on childhood obesity coupled with marketing mythologies. Adults need to recognize the collaborative and supportive friendship groups that group video game play generates rather than worrying about calorie conservation among the children watching while only two control screen action. Adults do not see children dancing to a movie's theme song; instead they see children replaying the same scene and hear them making noise instead of watching the DVD.

Parents have used the imaginary fat children to argue for less media access in *fritids*. They claim that children are spending too much time with media and need more exercise. Following this logic, they ask that *fritids* restrict media access and activities. While the goal is to reduce their child's total time in media play, parents may be unaware that media play in *fritids* can be of a higher quality than the same activity undertaken at home. By requesting that media access be restricted at *fritids,* parents achieve an overall reduction in media play without having to take on the responsibility of enforcement. The result, however, is a reduction in the variety of media play in *fritids* without consideration for the quality of that play experience.

This latest assault on children's media use is not without precedent. Today's claim that our children are fat because they spend too much time in the virtual garden is similar to earlier arguments that proffered a substitution theory. The suggestion is that healthy, aerobic play has been replaced by unhealthy, sedentary recreation enabled by digital devices. While it would be foolish to argue that the digital revolution has not changed our everyday living, it is equally imprudent to dismiss the complexity that characterizes our use of media, new and old. It is particularly disappointing to see the way that children's media use in after-school care settings is being restricted, and in some cases eliminated, when we still have not recognized the unique and diverse ways in which children play with media when they are made available in places and spaces beyond the scenes and settings imagined by the narratives of planned obsolescence, single player, sell more hardware, consumer marketing and scripted consumption.

Notes

1. Among the conferences at which I presented my research in progress were: *Summit 2000: Children, Youth & Media*, Toronto, 2000; *Young People & the Media: International Forum of Research,* UNESCO & Australian Broadcasting Authority, Sydney, 2000; *3rd World Congress of*

the International Toy Research Assn., London, 2002; *International Ratings Conference*, Office of Film and Literature Classification, Sydney, 2003; *Digital Generations Conference*, London, 2004; *4th World Congress of International Toy Researchers Assn.*, Spain, 2005.

2. For trends in the United States, see "Out of School Time: Leveraging Higher Education for Quality," The After-School Corporation, 2010.
3. *Skolverket* is the National Agency for Education. An explanation of the Swedish Education System in English is available on its Web site: http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/190; and more detailed information on childcare for school-age children: http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/2652. The Steering Documents outline the balance of responsibilities between national and local authorities: http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/493.
4. Since returning from my field trip to Sweden I have located a *Skolverket* report (2007) indicating a push for improvements in the articulation between *fritids* and "the curriculum for the compulsory school system...in relation to national objectives and requirements" ("Descriptive data on pre-school activities, school-age childcare, schools and adult education in Sweden 2006," *Swedish National Agency for Education Report no. 283*, p. 13). This report may not have been released at the time of my visit because school and *fritids* staff/management did not express awareness, concern or interest in a call for better integration and articulation with curricular goals. Moreover, an articulation between curriculum and leisure does not necessarily mean more structured learning in leisure time. In Sweden it may well mean greater integration of leisure and play culture in classrooms. The move to integrate *fritids* staff into primary school classrooms suggests a belief in "play as a learning mode." The report is available as a pdf from the *Skolverket* site under "Publications," http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/355.
5. The field trip was made possible by a fellowship from the Swedish Royal Academy of Letters, History & Antiquities (*Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien*) in association with the Australian Academy of the Humanities. See www.vitterhetsakad.se and www.humanities.org.au.
6. ACMA is the statutory authority of the Australian federal government responsible for broadcasting, Internet, radio, and telecommunications policies: www.acma.gov.au.
7. Although I do not speak Swedish, enough children spoke English that I was able to communicate directly in many instances and in other cases through a willing child interpreter or staff member.
8. Accessed via YouTube on 8/19/09: http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=siJhUjyIz00&NR=1.
9. Accessed via YouTube on 8/19/09: http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=5P6UU6m3cqk. In their Introduction to *The YouTube Reader* (2009:11), Snickars and Vonderau refer to the popularity of this particular clip, noting that its 83 million views far exceeds attendance for the most popular theatrically released films.
10. On YouTube and discourses of quality, see Eggo Müller's essay "Where Quality Matters: Discourses on the Art of Making a YouTube Video," in *The YouTube Reader*.
11. A non-governmental, industry self-regulation body, Entertainment Software Rating Board, www.esrb.org, assigns ratings to digital games.
12. I have corresponded with Club Penguin about when changes were implemented as a result of the August 2007 merger with Disney, but I have not received answers to all of my questions about the commercial dimensions of the site. In September 2007, I did not notice the "Toys" feature, and the children said they could decorate their igloos with furniture without a membership. Today a membership is required to furnish an igloo.

13. I am aware that some cynics might think screening a movie in theatrical style is merely a way to occupy a large number of children for 97 minutes. Childcare staff would never admit to deploying the "electronic babysitter," and I don't think they have such managerial intentions.
14. I am grateful to Martin Manning for his insights on game marketing.

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Web Sites

Australian Communication and Media Authority: www.acma.gov.au

Club Penguin: www.clubpenguin.com

Department of Education and Children's Services, South Australia: www.decs.sa.gov.au

Entertainment Software Rating Board: www.esrb.org

Skolverket (National Agency for Education): http://www.skolverket.se/sb/d/190

Swedish Royal Academy of Letters, History & Antiquities [*Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien*]: http://www.vitterhetsakad.se/home.html

YouTube: www.youtube.com